The Fourth Church Pulpit

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: James 1:19-27, Mark 9:30-37

"You have made them a little lower than God ... you have given them dominion."
Psalm 8:5,6

In a play, *That Day Alone,* by Pierre Van Passen, Nazi troops have captured a rabbi and in the process of doing everything they can think of to humiliate him they force him to take off all his clothes, even his wedding ring. They bend him over a barrel and beat him senseless. Even then the humiliation continues.

> "The brownshirts arranged themselves in a semicircle ... One walked over and with a pair of scissors cut the left side of Rabbi Warner's hair away. Then he took hold of the rabbi's beard and cut the right side of it away. Then he stepped back. The troopers laughed and slapped their sides.
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> "'Say something in Hebrew,' the captain ordered.
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> "'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,' the rabbi slowly pronounced in Hebrew. But one of the other officers interrupted him. 'Were you not preparing your sermon this morning?' he asked him.
>
> "'Yes,' said the rabbi.
>
> "'Well, you can preach it here to us. You'll never again see your synagogue: we've just burned it. Go ahead, preach the sermon,' he cried out. 'All quiet now, everybody, Jacob is going to preach a sermon to us.'
>
> "'Could I have my hat?' asked the rabbi.
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> "'Can't you preach without your hat?' the officer asked him.
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> "'Give him his hat!' he commanded.
>
> "Someone handed the rabbi his hat and he put it on his head. The sight made the men laugh the more. The man was naked and he was shivering. Then he spoke.
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> "'God created man in his image and likeness,' he said. 'That was to have been my text for the coming Sabbath.'" [Van Passen, *That Day Alone,* p. 311; cited by Cornelius Plantinga, *Not The Way Things Are Supposed To Be,* p. 32]

In the image of God. What in the world do we mean by that? We know, I think, what we don't mean. We do not mean that God looks like us; that there is a physical reality about God which is mirrored in human physicality. Our Jewish forebears knew the danger of that kind of thinking so they banned any physical representation of God; no idols; no pictures. They weren't even comfortable with verbal symbols for God, so they never even said the name of God out loud. Michelangelo gave God the body of a strong, mature, potent male and stretched him over e ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. But the moment we use a personal pronoun for God and then proceed from the pronoun to masculine physicality – or feminine physicality, for that matter –

we have crossed a line our oldest tradition warns us not to cross, and which having been crossed, has caused us untold theological controversy. The image of God, whatever that means, does not mean a body.

Now, what we've done is what always happens when we talk about this subject. We've inverted the question. "In the image of God" is a statement about us, not God. "In the image of God" is the answer to the most important question of all – who are we? What is a human being? And that, say the scholars, is the most important question in all of history.

A century ago T. H. Huxley said that the most important, and most interesting question, is the question of our place in nature and relation to the cosmos. [Hall]

Douglas John Hall, one of our brightest and best, echoes the sentiment one hundred years later: "No question plagues the contemporary spirit so much as (the human) question," and cites modern American novelist, Kurt Vonnegut, who with characteristic bluntness and irreverence asks, "What the hell are people for?" He asks, says Hall, for the whole epoch. [See D. J. Hall, *Professing The Faith*, p. 233]

What we are for – what we are about, is to image – or reflect – God. What an intriguing thought: our purpose is to represent the reality of God. How shall we do that? Some have suggested by employing our intellects, our logic ... God's image is our power of reason. Or is it our freedom?

The Reformation wasn't too sure it trusted human reason or freedom. Instead, said Martin Luther, God's image in us is our ability to trust, to have faith. John Calvin came up with what I think is the most intriguing notion of all by turning image from a noun into a verb. We image God insofar as we turn our lives toward God.

Eugene Peterson, a contemporary thinker, says that it's our imagination, our ability to see that which is not available to our senses; our creativity is the image of God in us. That is why, by the way, the church presents a Festival of the Arts annually. Not only because we like music and sculpture and poetry, but because we believe human creativity is one of the ways God's image in us becomes visible.

And that, the idea that we have within us the capacity to imagine and create – to join God in the project of creation – I believe, is not far from what the Bible itself says about the subject. In the first story in Scripture God makes human beings, male and female, in God's image and then gives them dominion over the project of creation, gives them responsibility for managing the place – a task that will require imagination and creativity, lots of hard work and determination – and a spiritual commitment to the task, a personal accountability. What we are for, the Bible says, what the image of God in us means is to be responsible for creation, for one another, for all our lives. To exercise dominion.

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them, ..." the Psalmist asked.

The answer:

> "You made them a little lower than God, crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands."

Personal Description: "a little lower than God, crowned with glory and honor." Position description: "dominion over the works of God's hands."

Of course, the tradition also suggests that there are some inherent problems. There is a worm in the apple. Human beings fall from grace, can't live within the limits and responsibilities of creation and start to bungle things badly. It's not all glory and honor in the Garden of Eden: it's lying and cheating and it's the apathetic refusal to be responsible and before you know it, it's expulsion, exile, dislocation, alienation and tragedy, as one brother murders the other. The tragedy of the Garden of Eden is simply the pathos of human history. In a recent essay in The Christian Century, Kathleen Norris quipped:

> "If I'm okay and you're okay and everyone's okay, then why is the world most certainly not okay?"

The Christian tradition has developed a marvelous eloquence over the centuries in describing human frailty, failure, guilt and sin. So much so, in fact, that it has become a euphemism – a bad joke. There is a broad cultural suspicion that it isn't authentically Christian if it doesn't exegete our sexual behavior almost voyeuristically, and the consequent punishment, the grislier the better.

But there is this "other" word: this positive description of human beings which is there from the beginning.

I would argue that our spiritual rebirth and growth and formation begins here, not what's wrong with us, but with a sense of our God-given glory and honor, the image of God in us, reflected in our power and potential and dominion.

Professor Hall writes urgently and eloquently:

> "The critical dimension is only one side of the matter. The other... is that as creatures of God, human beings are beings of astonishing promise and beauty who are by no means forbidden to wonder at and rejoice in their own being..." [*Ibid*, p. 212]

Jesus did not ask his disciples to be less than they were. He never asked them to live with less passion and love and joy and hope and commitment. In fact, quite the opposite. He called them away from routine tasks to heroic discipleship; he invited them to him as children of God, citizens of God's Kingdom. He called greatness out of them – each one of them.

There is a wonderfully awkward and embarrassing incident in the 9th chapter of Mark that underscores the point. It is a serious moment. He has just told them again about the way he will suffer and die. Instead of listening and pondering, however, they are arguing about who is the greatest. Jesus' response is very interesting. He does not say what we think he should, that disciples shouldn't even be thinking about personal greatness at a moment like that: that they should be forgoing any hopes they entertained of glory and success in the process of denying themselves. It's an interesting response, actually. "If you want to be first," he says, "you must learn to be a servant." If you seek greatness, you must change, not your aspirations but your definition. It is an important emphasis. Jesus calls his people to be great. God calls human beings to dominion – to this responsibility for creation, gives human beings the power, the intelligence and imagination: attributes of God, in order to responsibly manage creation.

Things go badly for us when we fail to live up to that high expectation: when we forget who we are, that God's image is in us, or when someone or something takes it from us. What could possibly erase the image of God in us? The Nazi troopers tried and failed with Rabbi Warner. But sometimes there are strong forces that succeed, particularly if they begin early enough.

We have, in the past month, experienced an urban nightmare. An eleven-year-old boy, carrying a handgun, wounds two children and kills another, fourteen-year-old Shavon Dean. A few days later this eleven-year-old, Robert Sandifer, is hunted down and executed. This is happening in Chicago, not Rwanda, not China, not Nazi Germany. And what to me is more of a moral nightmare than the fact that it happened, that is we have accommodated it.

I don't know what to do about it – but I know that we are guilty of sin against God's image in us and God's gift of honor and glory and dominion, if somehow we develop the capacity to shake our head, sigh, take a deep breath, feel grateful that it happens on the South Side and not here, install another deadbolt on our door and move on. I know that an eleven-year-old boy with a handgun is a violation of everything we believe about creation, about humankind, about what life in community means.

Maybe the mayor should ask the whole city to take a month and have a discussion about what to do about it. Actually I think we do know what to do about it. Everybody who thinks about it has part of the answer. Robert's tragedy began when he was born to a fifteen-year-old single mother. We know the chances for wholeness and health in that situation are slim. Robert was abused as a baby, in trouble in school, with police ... so hardened that he thought that being in a court appointed foster home was "doin time." The truth is that from the day of his birth, Robert was told – by his parents, care-givers, the system that didn't know how to cope with him – that he didn't matter, that he was worth little if anything, that he was a disposable object. And he simply lived that out – in eleven short years.

What to do? Could we not make it an urban priority to prevent fifteen-year-olds from having babies? ... and if that fails, make it our next priority to see that fifteen-year-olds with babies have the resources to nurture them to health? ... and if that fails, make it a priority to see that the baby is not abused? ... and if that fails, find a way to put that baby in a place that is safe instead of returning babies to abusive parents in the name of someone's notion of "family"? What to do? Could we not make certain that a four-year-old is in preschool, in a safe and clean building, and when he is six, that his school is as good as this marvelous society can provide? Can we not build schools with as much pride as the United Center? And when he is eight that he has places to go and things to do. What to do? Can we not take the gun out of a little boy's hand and out of his neighborhood and out of our life – so that when he gets angry, as little boys do, he learns to push and shove, but not shoot and kill?

Brent Staples is a writer for the *New York Times* who has authored a fine book, *Parallel Time,* which tells the story of his growing up in the African American community in Chester, Pennsylvania, on to college and graduate school at the University of Chicago. His book begins with the account of his return to Chester to identify the body of his baby brother Blake, a cocaine dealer, who has been murdered. Staples writes out of his own life experience:

"The violence that stalks the cities today is a ghostly presence, made of self-loathing and rage. It haunts the souls of teen-age boys who are fatherless and lost, so much so that guns and gangs are the only solace. By fourth grade, those boys are finished at school and have jumped some mental track. By sixteen they are so angry that they 'smoke you for staring at them.'" [*New York Times*, 11/5/93]

In the image of God. In a book that is receiving a lot of attention, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,* Stephen R. Covey argues that basic to success in business and in life is a sense of self based on something other than what others tell us about ourselves. I don't know what kind of theological commitments Mr. Covey has, but he does sound like he knows about the Judeo/Christian notion of the image of God and human responsibility and dominion.

Most of us, he says, come to a conclusion about who we are on the basis of what we think others say about us – our social mirror and three social maps. We have three basically:

Genetic – You can't help who you are; it's in your genes; your grandparents did it to you.

Psychic – Your early home life made you the person you are today; your parents did it to you.

Environmental – Your boss or your spouse is doing it to you.

Covey says those mirrors are not accurate, but they have a way of becoming self-fulfilling prophecy.

Basic to success, says Covey, is the sense of one's self as a free and autonomous and valuable human being. It is not far, I think, from what the Bible means by dominion.

Most of us, I think, receive it when someone gives it to us: when someone reminds us by valuing or respecting or loving us; or by expecting much from us, by depending on us and looking to us to be productive and successful.

Brent Staples, the *New York Times* writer, looks back on his life and credits people who would not give up on him: a high school English teacher, a Quaker student worker, a professor who pushed him to go to college.

That gift: that reminder that human beings have God's image and thus have dominion, is given here in our Tutoring Program, when young children from Cabrini-Green sit down with a volunteer tutor for a few hours every week, and in addition to math and English, learn an even more important lesson, that they matter, that their lives are not expendable, that someone cares about them, loves them, in a sense depends on them to become all they can become.

And it happens to you and me when we ponder – or are reminded of – the sheer miracle of our own lives, and what we have been given, and what God has bestowed on us by way of glory and honor.

"How did you survive poverty and discrimination and racism and become so incredibly successful?" someone asked the distinguished African American intellectual, philosopher, poet, Howard Thurman. He answered, "My mama kept telling me I was a child of God and I believed her."

Something like that happens to a man or a woman when the reality of God's love in Jesus Christ sinks in. We are not disposable. We are worth the life of God's son. We are not a cosmic accident. We are created in God's image. We are not placed here willy-nilly to simply take up space for seventy or eighty or ninety years and then disappear. We are here to exercise dominion over creation, responsibility for our own lives.

We are not created for a few decades and then discarded on the ash heap of history – none of us; not little Robert Sandifer, not Shavon Dean, not you or me. We are created with God's image in us, with honor and glory and dominion. Amen.